

The Idiot Box: How TV Hypnotizes You

In preparation for James Corbett's [upcoming course](#) on The History of the Media, The Corbett Report Subscriber is presenting a three-part series on the past, present and future of mass media. Last week we examined [How the First Media Moguls Shaped History](#). This week we examine the history of psychological research into mass media's effects on the public mind and explore the particular properties of the television set that render its audience susceptible to its lies.

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You can tell a lot about an item by the nicknames we give it. So what do our nicknames for the television tell us about that device?

"The idiot box."

"The boob tube."

"The tell-lie-vision."

It doesn't take a super sleuth to puzzle this one out. From the very inception of commercial television in the 1950s—when the phrase "boob tube" was [first coined](#) to lament the dumbing-down effect that the device was presumed to be having on the populace—to the zenith of the TV's cultural hegemony in the late 20th century, fears about the television's ability to create zombified couch potatoes out of its passive audience have been ever-present.

It's no coincidence that the 2006 comedy (or should that be [docudrama](#)?), *Idiocracy*, introduces its viewers to the eponymous future idiocracy—in which the intelligence of the population has declined to shockingly low levels—by showing a junk food-ingesting "lawyer" in the midst of enjoying the hit television show of the year 2505, [Ow! My Balls!](#) It's also no coincidence that the same movie sees protagonist Private Joe Bauers formulating a plan for heading off the development of this idiocracy by encouraging people to read books rather than watch TV.

We all know the trope: television makes you dumb, lazy and passive, and (by implication) it renders you susceptible to the lies and manipulations of those who create the TV programming. But is it true?

As it turns out, not only are concerns about the content and the presentation of TV programming well-founded, but there is an even darker side to the device than is commonly realized. There is ample research to suggest that the TV is actually designed to send you into a trance-like state that lowers your cognitive defences against the lies the TV networks (and their corporate owners) are attempting to push on their docile audience.

In order to understand this neglected part of the television story, we first have to reconsider the advent of commercial radio in the 1920s and the civilization-altering effects it wrought on the world in the 1930s.



Radio and Early Propaganda Research

It is difficult from our perspective today to properly understand just how transformative a technology the radio was. It altered people's daily routines (as the widespread popularity of the *Amos 'n' Andy* program [reportedly](#) lowered church attendance on Sunday evenings); it altered people's perceptions of the world, providing them the opportunity to hear live, on-the-scene reports from distant locales; and it provided the would-be social engineers with an entirely new vector for manipulating the masses.

[Last week](#) I recounted the story of how William Paley transformed the struggling Philadelphia-based Columbia Phonographic Broadcasting System radio network into the massive CBS empire on the back of his success in selling cigars to his radio audience. But it wasn't just advertisers who realized the utility of this new medium for influencing the thoughts and habits of a susceptible population. Largely forgotten today, FDR's "[fireside chat](#)" radio addresses were a revolutionary step at the time, affording the president a chance to talk directly to the American public without the newspaper reporter's editorial insertions or the newsreel editor's interventions. For the first time, the average Jane and Joe could literally hear the president speaking to them in the comfort of their own home. The intimacy of the medium was profound and no doubt a contributing factor in FDR's incredible electoral successes.

Naturally, the potential of this new medium for controlling the population was quickly recognized by the powers-that-shouldn't-be. In 1935, social scientists Hadley Cantril and Gordon Allport wrote *The Psychology of Radio*, in which [they opined](#):

"Radio is an altogether novel medium of communication, preeminent as a means of social control and epochal in its influence upon the mental horizons of men."

Accordingly, it wasn't long before the "manipulators of the organized habits and opinions of the masses"—who, as Edward Bernays [informed us](#), "constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country"—took note and began working on the problem of how best to use radio as a medium of social control.

As it happens, the aforementioned Hadley Cantril just happened to be the old Dartmouth College roommate of Nelson Rockefeller, whose Rockefeller Foundation provided a \$67,000 two-year grant to Cantril to found the "[Princeton Radio Project](#)," a research unit which, as the Rockefeller Foundation [tells us](#), "used the tools of social psychology to study radio."

The director of the project, Paul Lazarsfeld, framed the group's research interest [thusly](#):

"If radio in the United States is to serve the best interests of the people, it is essential that an objective analysis be made of what these interests are and how the unique psychological and social characteristics of radio may be devoted to them."

Although cloaked in the language of social concern, the group's research took a decidedly devious turn. When Orson Welles' hyper-realistic (for the time) presentation of H. G. Wells' classic science fiction story, *The War of the Worlds*, was broadcast as the Halloween edition of Mercury Theater on the Air on October 30, 1938, the [resulting hysteria](#)—with some panicked listeners apparently mistaking the dramatization for an actual news report of an alien invasion—became fodder for the Princeton Radio Project's first major study. The work that resulted, [*The Invasion From Mars: A Study in the Psychology of Panic*](#), remains a landmark in the field of media studies that is still dissected and debated among academics to this very day.

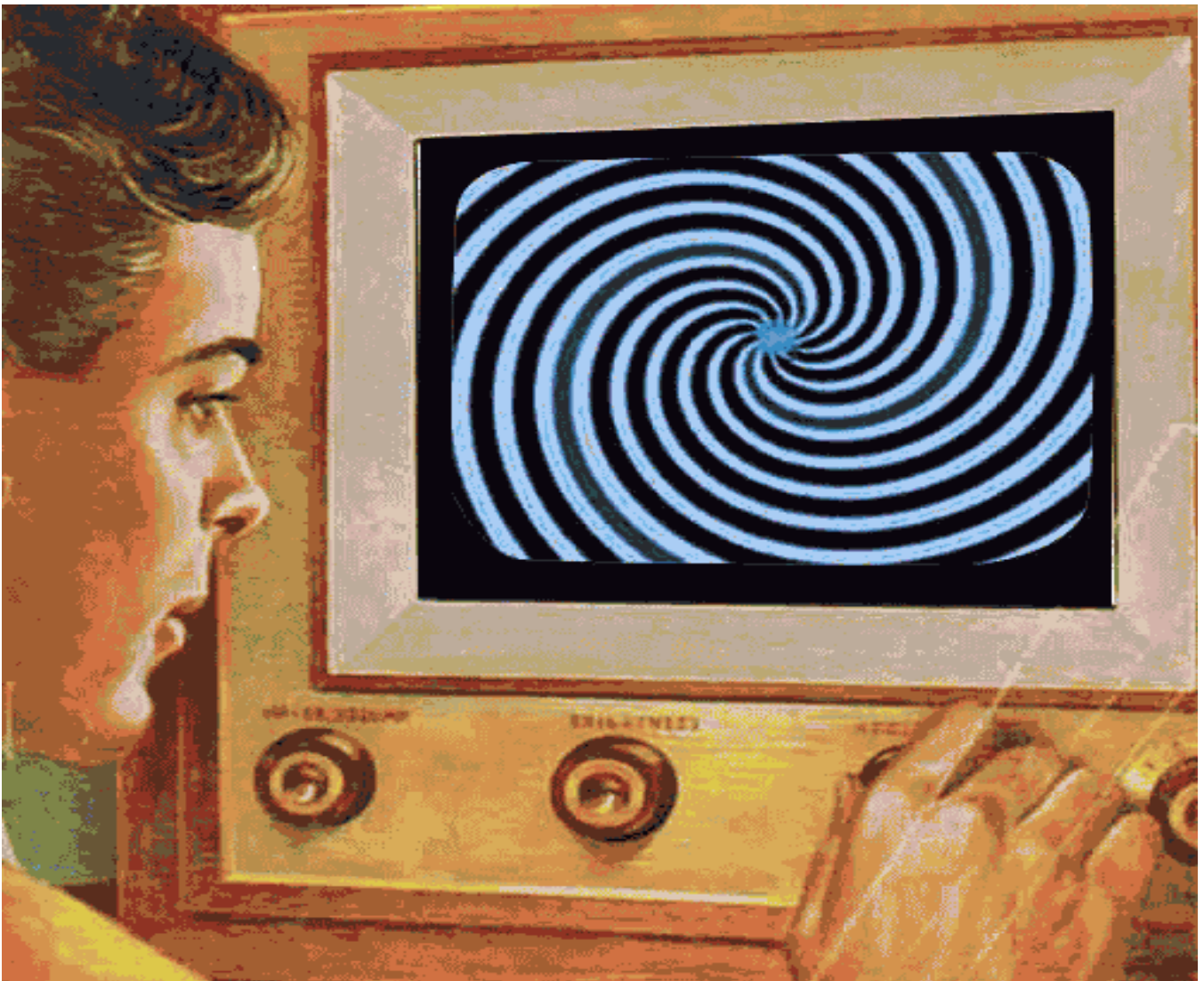
In his [preface](#) to the 1966 edition of the book, Cantril stressed that what the subsequent research into the "War of the Worlds" hysteria revealed was just how susceptible the general public was to being whipped into a frenzy of panic, and just how useful electronic media could be in that endeavour.

*"Since the publication of *The Invasion from Mars* in 1940, I've often been asked whether I thought such a thing could happen again. The questioners usually imply that we are now too sophisticated*

to be taken in by anything so fanciful. Unfortunately I've always had to reply that of course it could happen today, and even on a much more extensive scale."

The Princeton Radio Project and the various organizations associated with its affiliated researchers—such as the Rockefeller-funded Office of Public Opinion Research—would continue their studies into [the psychology of social control through the media](#). And, as effective a medium as radio had proven to be for this purpose, the next telecommunications technology, television, would prove that much more useful to the would-be social engineers.

Television Hypnotizes the Masses



For at least 150 years, researchers have known that [the brain carries electrical currents](#). These oscillating electrical signals, formally known as "neural oscillations," are better known to the public as brain waves. Measured by electroencephalography (EEG), these brain waves typically have a broad spectral content, but various brain functions are associated with increased activity in specific frequency bands.

Alpha waves—in the 8 to 12 Hz frequency band—are typically associated with periods of relaxed wakefulness and tend to increase when the eyes are closed.

Beta waves—in the 13 to 30 Hz band—are associated with normal waking consciousness.

Other types of neural oscillations include delta waves (1 to 4 Hz, associated with deep, non-REM sleep), theta waves (4 to 8 Hz, associated with learning, memory and spatial navigation), and gamma waves (30 to 150 Hz, associated with large scale brain network activity and cognition).

The conscious state observed when alpha wave activity is prevalent is often described as "[hypnagogic](#)," or a type of daydreaming lying somewhere between sleep and wakefulness. When the brain is in this state, a person's critical faculties are typically disengaged, leaving them more susceptible to information that would otherwise be rejected by their fully conscious mind.

As it so happens, this hypnagogic state is precisely the type of state that is induced when one begins watching television. As Joyce Nelson details in [*The Perfect Machine: Television and The Bomb*](#):

"In November 1969, a researcher named Herbert Krugman, who later became manager of public-opinion research at General Electric headquarters in Connecticut, decided to try to discover what goes on physiologically in the brain of a person watching TV. He elicited the co-operation of a twenty-two-year-old secretary and taped a single electrode to the back of her head. The wire from this electrode connected to a Grass Model 7 Polygraph, which in turn interfaced with a Honeywell 7600 computer and a CAT 400B computer.

"Flicking on the TV, Krugman began monitoring the brain-waves of the subject. What he found through repeated trials was that within about thirty seconds, the brain-waves switched from predominantly beta waves, indicating alert and conscious attention, to predominantly alpha waves, indicating an unfocused, receptive lack of attention: the state of aimless fantasy and daydreaming below the threshold of consciousness. When Krugman's subject turned to reading through a magazine, beta waves reappeared, indicating that conscious and alert attentiveness had replaced the daydreaming state."

Krugman's initial, crude experiments were repeated and verified by extensive (and more accurate) testing. There was no doubt: TV rapidly induces an alpha-state consciousness in its viewers. As Nelson goes on to report, this finding gave rise to an entire field of research within the advertising industry, with NW Ayers / ABH using EEGs to evaluate the effect of commercials for large-name clients like AT&T and marketing firms like Simmons Market Research Bureau, Cockfield, Brown & Company Ltd and KSW & G Inc. following suit shortly thereafter.

The field these advertising companies pioneered discovered how best to implant messages in the minds of the alpha state TV viewing audience. They discovered that while in this state, brains are more responsive to tone of voice, rhythm and melody, rhyme and harmony, and pictorial emotional triggers than straightforward speech. It wasn't long before advertisers dropped any pretense that a commercial was designed to inform a viewer about the specifications of a product and instead began concentrating on songs, jingles and carefully-worded slogans combined with emotionally suggestive visuals to embed a desired product or idea in the public consciousness.

Krugman summed up the meaning of his experimental finding by noting that the *real* information transmitted during a television broadcast is that which is "not thought about at the time of exposure," i.e., the unconscious, subliminal and emotional nature of the programming.

Tony Schwartz—the marketer who was credited with winning the presidency for Jimmy Carter by carefully crafting his television persona—was more blunt about the process in his tell-all confessional, *The Responsive Chord: How Radio and TV Manipulate You, Who You Vote For, What*

You Buy, And How You Think. Speaking in his capacity as an "political advertiser," Schwartz [admitted](#):

"Commercials that attempt to tell the listener something are inherently not as effective as those that attach to something that is already in him. We are not concerned with getting things across to people as much as out of people. Electronic media are particularly effective tools in this regard because they provide us with direct access to people's minds." [Emphases in original.]

Any serious student of television should have no difficulty in identifying the ways that this "access to people's minds" have been used by conmen of various stripes, not just the admen with a particular product to sell, but the would-be controllers of society who are looking to steer society in a particular direction.

Some of the attempts at this manipulation of the TV viewing audience seem almost quaint from today's perspective. Remember when Fox [admitted to inserting climate propaganda](#) in all their programming in order to manipulate the public? Ahhh, those were the days.

These days, the TV is being used even more effectively and for an even more nefarious agenda: to weaponize your neighbours against you as adversaries in the new biosecurity state. We don't have to speculate about this. Last year saw the [dramatic revelations](#) that Britain's shadowy "Independent Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Behaviours" (SPI-B) had employed the nation's top social scientists to discover ways to more effectively sell the scamdemic to the public. Their answer? To "use [the] media to increase the sense of personal threat" from COVID, of course.

If we ever emerge from this period of madness with our wits still intact, this might make for an interesting study for future researchers: to what extent does television viewing correlate with one's belief in the scamdemic? I hypothesize that the correlation would be significant.

Regardless, it is a documentable fact that television induces certain brain states in its audience, and it is equally documentable fact that rich and powerful special interests have been researching how to use this TV-induced hypnosis to their advantage for over half a century. To believe that the art and science of manipulating the public has not progressed significantly from the days of Krugman and Schwartz would be the height of naïveté.

To The Future: Fake News and The New Media



I know what you're thinking: TV? Pfff. OK, boomer.

Yes, in case you didn't know, TV is so *last century*. Now the public are all crazy about the latest Netflix series at best and short, disjointed meme videos on Tik Tok at worst. The youth of today are not getting their information (or their misinformation) from television.

But as you may have already noticed, the powers-that-shouldn't-be are busily working on steering the new online media in the same direction as the heavily-controlled TV paradigm. The fact that you are reading these words shows that they haven't been successful in that endeavour . . . yet.

However, there are monumental changes to the media landscape on the horizon and, as always, if we aren't prepared for those changes, we will be caught up in the next era of media manipulation and control.

Unfortunately, the way things are heading, once we are inserted into the *next* media paradigm we may never have a chance to escape. . . .